

Military Service and the Development of the Robin Hood Legend in the Fourteenth Century¹

On 21 November 1338, forty-three archers joined the company of troops entrusted with the security of the Isle of Wight. The garrison pay-roll, which forms the greater part of an excellent set of accounts now preserved at the Public Record Office, records the names of the newly arrived men. In their midst is a name as familiar as any from English literature or history: Robin Hood.² Should an historian dwell unduly over this hitherto unnoticed reference to England's most famous outlaw hero? Most informed opinion would probably think not. Barrie Dobson and John Taylor, for example, have argued that 'the discovery of the name Robert or Robin Hood in a medieval English document is not in itself of particular significance':³ it is not an unusual name and plenty of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century examples could easily be cited. Moreover, this new reference is not of particularly early date. It is the aim of this article to show that, in this case, such scepticism would be misguided; that finding a man called Robin Hood amongst a company of archers hired for the defence of England at the start of the Hundred Years War is indeed significant in the light it casts on the murky early life of the Robin Hood legend.

We must begin with the name itself: Robin Hood. Could it be that what we have on the Isle of Wight pay-roll is a chance combination of names which, in a population of, say, five million in the England of the late 1330s, was bound to crop up occasionally; a combination of names which has absolutely nothing to do with the legendary outlaw? Although this must remain a possibility, there are very good reasons for believing that it does not adequately explain the appearance of Robin Hood on the Isle of Wight pay-roll. It is not that either Christian name 'Robin' or surname 'Hood' were in themselves unusual in fourteenth-century England. Hood was relatively common, if tending to occur in local concentrations—as, for instance, in the Wakefield area of south Yorkshire.⁴ Robin was an

¹ Earlier versions of this paper were presented to the Hull Medieval Society (November 1988) and the Late Medieval Seminar, Institute of Historical Research (February 1990). I am grateful to those who attended these meetings—and also to my colleagues Dr. B. A. English, Professor D. M. Palliser and Dr. J. J. N. Palmer - for their helpful comments. Unless otherwise stated, all manuscripts cited in the footnotes are in the custody of the Public Record Office, London.

² Written as 'Robyn Hod': E101/21/32 m. 3. The new arrivals brought the total number of archers up to 170; on the same day there were fifteen men-at-arms.

³ R. B. Dobson and J. Taylor, *Rymes of Robyn Hood* (2nd edn., Gloucester, 1989), p. 12. The Robin Hood ballads cited in the footnotes are all to be found in Dobson and Taylor's edition.

⁴ On this surname (meaning a head-covering, probably originating in the occupational name 'Hooder' or as a nickname), see Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes of Robyn Hood*, pp. 11-12.

everyday diminutive of Robert, which was one of the commonest of male Christian names: at a time when at least one in four of the male population were called John, something like 5% to 10% were called Robert.⁵ But however frequently men baptised Robert were called Robin in their daily lives by their families and friends, when they were named in Latin administrative records, they would be styled 'Robert', not 'Robin'. Diminutives were not usually employed in such records, the clerks almost invariably preferring the formal version of Christian names. As A.L. Poole observed long ago, 'the language of the records differed from the language of the people';⁶ and in view of this, the appearance of a 'Robin Hood' in a Latin Exchequer account must represent a far more unusual and significant phenomenon than previous commentators have allowed. That this has not been appreciated by contributors to the Robin Hood debate can probably be attributed to the fact that diminutives were commonly used in records which were drawn up in Anglo-Norman French. The king's chamber accounts of the 1320s offer a very appropriate case in point. These include, as Joseph Hunter first noticed over a hundred years ago, a certain Robin Hood employed as a '*valet portour de la Chambre le Roi*'; but they also mention, amongst others, a Robin Baker, a Robin Chandeller and a Robin Diker, as well as several men called 'Jack'.⁷ Clerks were not, therefore, disinclined to use diminutives when writing in the vernacular language of the court, though it seems to have been men of modest status, such as junior members of the household staff, who were referred to in this familiar fashion. By contrast, the Latin records of the royal household present names in more formal terms. Thus, for example, William de Norwell's wardrobe book, covering the period from July 1338 to May 1340, makes reference to nearly two hundred separate individuals called 'Robert', but includes not a single 'Robin'.⁸ Turning to records relating directly to military service, the contrast between the usage of Latin and Anglo-Norman French records is equally evident. The retinue roll of Sir Thomas Dagworth's company, serving in Brittany in 1346-47, is drawn up in French and includes, in a list of forty named archers, three 'Jacks' and a 'Harry'.⁹ By contrast, the Isle of Wight garrison pay-roll for the late 1330s, upon

⁵ These figures derive from a statistical analysis of the Christian names of many thousands of mid fourteenth-century English males. After John, the commonest names were William and Thomas (10-12% each), and then Robert. Cf. Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes of Robyn Hood*, p. 11; V. Davis, 'Medieval English clergy database', *History & Computing*, ii (1990), 79-80; E.G. Withycombe, *The Oxford dictionary of English Christian names* (3rd edn., Oxford, 1977), p. xvi.

⁶ A.L. Poole, *Obligations of society in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries* (Oxford, 1946), p. 11; cf. R.A. McKinley, *A history of British surnames* (London, 1990), p. 33.

⁷ E101/379/6; E101/379/7; E101/379/17.

⁸ *The Wardrobe Book of William de Norwell, 12 July 1338 to 27 May 1340*, ed. M. Lyon, B. Lyon, H.S. Lucas & J. de Sturler (Brussels, 1983).

⁹ E101/25/18. Diminutive forms are sometimes to be found amongst the names of *men-at-arms* on Anglo-Norman French muster rolls: for example, Robyn de la Chaumbre and Robinet de Wikham, who appear in an undated, fourteenth-century retinue list (E101/35/2 m. 10). This particular roll includes a list of archers, but these names are latinised and there is not a diminutive to be found amongst them. An esquire may be styled 'Robin', but rarely a knight: for a good illustration of this contrast, see *Rotuli*

which we have noticed the name of Robin Hood, is a Latin document throughout. It lists, in all, nearly five hundred names, including twenty-five 'Roberts'; but only one Christian name is presented in diminutive form and that belongs to our Robin Hood. Many other Latin pay accounts and muster rolls offer a similar picture. Thus, for example, a roll of the Jersey garrison in the early 1340s is drawn-up in Latin and, though containing several hundred names, contains no diminutive forms.¹⁰ This is not to suggest that diminutives were *never* used in Latin military records; but when they were, they were generally applied to young, probably under-age, fighting men and usually to distinguish them from older men from the same family. Scanning through the Latin horse inventories drawn up prior to the battle of Falkirk in 1298, for example, we find, among the names of those serving in Sir Robert Fitz Pain's retinue, a young man called Robinett Fitz Pain.¹¹ Such very occasional examples apart, diminutive forms of Christian names are not a normal feature of fourteenth-century Latin military records.¹² The appearance of a Robin Hood in such a record suggests, therefore, that the norms of clerical practice have been set aside; that the clerk, recognising that this is no ordinary name, has accorded it extraordinary treatment.

The inclusion of the name of the greenwood hero amongst the list of archers in the Isle of Wight garrison in 1338-39 is all the more notable when it is realised that very nearly all the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Robin Hoods in the records are not styled *Robin Hood* at all, but *Robert Hood*.¹³ This has not always been made clear by modern commentators. Thus, for example, the man in prison in 1354 as a consequence of trespasses of vert and venison in the forest of Rockingham is styled *Robin Hood* by E.K. Chambers, but the relevant Close roll entry shows him to be just another Robert.¹⁴ In regarding the names Robert and Robin as interchangeable, scholars have obscured the fact that, of these much discussed men, it is only Edward II's chamber porter who is actually called *Robin Hood* in the records; and as we have seen, the fact that this particular Robin appears in an Anglo-Norman French record diminishes his significance. All the other well-known Robins in the records of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries are, upon closer examination, found to be Roberts.¹⁵ Several of these Robert Hoods have been championed by scholars

Scotiae, ed. D. Macpherson et al. (2 vols., 1814), i. 308-9.

¹⁰ E101/23/28: printed in M.H. Marett Godfray 'Documents relatifs aux attaques sur les îles de la Manche, 1338-45', *La société Jersiaise pour l'étude de l'histoire*. Bulletin, iii (1877), 39-46.

¹¹ *Scotland in 1298: documents relating to the campaign of Edward I in that year*, ed. H. Gough (London, 1888), p. 171.

¹² Records relating to military service on the Chancery rolls (for example, letters of protection) are, in their treatment of names, even more formal than those associated with the mechanisms of muster and review.

¹³ The distinctive compound surname 'Robinhood' (discussed below) is not embraced by this statement.

¹⁴ E.K. Chambers, *English literature at the close of the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1945), p. 130; cf. C54/192 m. 19, calendared in *C(alendar of) C(lose) R(olls), 1354-1360*, 23.

¹⁵ For some of these Robert Hoods from the later thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, see F.J. Child, *The English and Scottish popular ballads* (5 vols., Boston, 1882-98), iii.

over the years and, indeed, the arguments supporting the candidature of the man styled *fugitivus* in the Pipe Rolls of the 1220s and 1230s as the original Robin have been rather strengthened by the recent work of David Crook.¹⁶ But the fact remains that there is no undisputed evidence to connect any of the *Robert Hoods* with the celebrated outlaw—either as the originator of the legend or as a later reflection of it. Two new examples illustrate the problem quite nicely. In 1346 a man called Robert Hod can be glimpsed serving as a messenger for Sir Thomas Lucy.¹⁷ Then, in 1363, a man named Robert Hood is included amongst the mounted archers serving with Thomas Ward esquire at Neufchâtel-en-Bray.¹⁸ As a junior member of a prominent northern banneret's household, the first of these Roberts would, according to Sir James Holt's view, feel a close affinity with the characters of late medieval Robin Hood ballads. On the other hand, the connection with the legendary outlaw's most notable skill, archery, makes the latter Robert Hood of more than normal interest; after all, none of the other often-discussed men of this name are in any way associated with the bowman's craft. It is possible that such examples as these provide evidence of popular awareness of the Robin Hood legend in the mid-fourteenth century; but, on balance, it is more likely that the name association is purely coincidental. Robert Hood is just too commonplace a name to allow for a confident connection to be made with the greenwood hero. *Robin Hood*, on the other hand, is far from common in Latin records; and an archer of that name, as we have on the Isle of Wight in 1338, must surely be associated in some way with the legendary outlaw.

What is the nature of this association? Although our archer would appear to be the earliest authentic *Robin Hood* yet to be found in the records, he is not, of course, the original Robin Hood. He is, rather, a reflection of the existence of the tales. If the origins of the Robin Hood legend are almost certainly to be traced to the earlier thirteenth century (if not earlier), then its content and character clearly underwent significant changes during the succeeding two hundred years as new themes and personalities were woven in and others were dropped, so that the tales which have come down to us from the fifteenth century may well bear little resemblance to the original features of the Robin Hood story. How quickly did these evolving tales become absorbed into popular consciousness? They were certainly widely known by the later 1370s, when the 'rymes of Robyn Hood' were mentioned by William Langland. But the appearance of a Robin Hood on the Isle of Wight garrison roll seems to provide evidence that the tales were common knowledge nearly forty

56; J. Bellamy, *Robin Hood: an historical enquiry* (London, 1985), pp. 114-15.

¹⁶ Dr Crook's most recent article ('The sheriff of Nottingham and Robin Hood: the genesis of the legend?', *Thirteenth-Century England II. Proceedings of the Newcastle upon Tyne Conference, 1987*. ed. P.R. Coss and S.D. Lloyd (Woodbridge, 1988), pp. 59-68) suggests that the Robert Hood of the Pipe Rolls might be the Robert of Wetherby who was hunted down in Yorkshire during the summer of 1225. Cf. J.C. Holt, *Robin Hood* (2nd edn., London, 1989), pp. 189-91.

¹⁷ Having brought letters from Sir Thomas to the king, he received a royal gift of one mark: E403/336 m. 49.

¹⁸ British Library, Additional MS. 41567, Q (ii) [fo. 252].

years before the B text of *Piers Plowman* was written, and, moreover, suggests that certain of the key ingredients of the later ballads were already present. Such a claim may not appear particularly ambitious. After all, scholars have known for some time of the highly distinctive compound surname 'Robinhood', first noticed in a Sussex subsidy roll of 1296; a surname which apparently suggests knowledge of the ballad hero by the very last years of the thirteenth century.¹⁹ Recently, moreover, new evidence has come to light that a royal clerk knew of Robin Hood as an outlaw by the 1260s. A certain William son of Robert le Fevre, mentioned as an outlaw on an eyre roll, is styled William Robehod when he appears in a corresponding Memoranda Roll entry.²⁰ This important discovery, combined with a number of further occurrences of the Robinhood surname from the 1270s, 1280s and 1290s, has led Sir James Holt to conclude that 'the legend must have been a national one by the second half of the thirteenth century'.²¹ This conclusion is enticing, but not wholly convincing. Although the Robinhood surnames, and in particular the William Robehod of the 1260s Memoranda Roll, may reasonably be seen as evidence that clerks working in the Exchequer and the royal law courts were aware of the name and reputation of Robin Hood, this does not necessarily imply the existence of 'an evolved and well-articulated ... legend'. It may suggest no more than that by the 1260s Robin Hood had become a byword for outlawry.²² The activities of the notorious Folville gang, it will be remembered, gave rise to the expression 'Folville's law'—or the 'justifiable redress of grievances by force'²³—but this violent family did not, as far as we know, become the central characters of popular ballads.

The evidence from the Isle of Wight garrison roll of the late 1330s, if read aright, surely tells us rather more about Robin Hood and the place that he occupied in the popular mind by the second quarter of the fourteenth century. It not only reveals that Robin's name was a commonplace, but also that this was the consequence of an awareness of the tales, rather than simply a knowledge of the activities of a particular contemporary individual or of a conventional outlaw nickname. For what the entry on the muster roll provides is a clear allusion to archery, one of the most memorable ingredients in the tales, as well as, less directly, a reflection of the distinctive social status and unusual life-style of the greenwood

¹⁹ On the Robinhood surname, see Holt, *Robin Hood*, pp. 52-53, 187-88.

²⁰ David Crook 'Some further evidence concerning the dating of the origins of the legend of Robin Hood', *English Historical Review*, xcix (1984), 530-34.

²¹ Holt, *Robin Hood*, p. 187, drawing on Crook, 'The sheriff of Nottingham and Robin Hood: the genesis of the legend?', p. 59.

²² 'Interesting as it is to learn that criminals were styled 'Robinhood' by the twelvesixties, perhaps nearly everything that made and makes that name immortal followed thereafter': R.B. Dobson and J. Taylor, 'General review: Robin Hood', *Northern History*, xxvi (1990), 231; cf. Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes of Robyn Hood*, p. xxii. There also remains a possibility that the Robinhood surname, in some of its guises at least, is a heritable family name, with nothing at all to do with the greenwood hero.

²³ J.R. Maddicott, 'The birth and setting of the ballads of Robin Hood', *English Historical Review*, xciii (1978), 294-95; R.H. Bowers, "'Foleuyles lawes" ("Piers Plowman", C. XXII. 247)', *Notes and Queries*, new series, viii (1961), 327-28.

company. It must be conceded that our insight into the popular mind is offered by a clerk. This is, incidentally, the case with the majority of early references to the Robin Hood legend²⁴ and is also very probably true of the author of the *Gest* itself.²⁵ But if clerks, who were not intended as the primary audience for the Robin Hood tales, can be seen to be conversant with the doings of the greenwood outlaw, then might we not reasonably conclude that the tales were widely diffused throughout society? What is absolutely clear is that this diffusion was not confined to the north and midlands where the Robin Hood tales are set and presumably where they originated. As Dobson and Taylor have pointed out, the majority of early references to Robin Hood 'were committed to writing by authors known to have been living in the south of England'.²⁶ The Robin Hood whom we have observed in the Isle of Wight garrison gives further weight to this observation.²⁷

It can be seen that the clerk who added 'Robyn Hod' to the muster roll knew it to be no ordinary name; he was aware that this was a name which carried with it a reputation, most obviously for archery, but also perhaps for a particular life-style. But how did it come

²⁴ If the *name* Robin Hood had become a commonplace with the clerks staffing the king's law courts by the later thirteenth century, then it is to late medieval lawyers that we owe many of those Robin Hood maxims (such as 'Robin Hood in Barnsdale stood') which suggest an acquaintance with the *tales*—an acquaintance shared, apparently, by a wide range of churchmen by the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes of Robyn Hood*, pp. 1-5; *idem*, 'General review: Robin Hood', 230; Maddicott, 'The birth and setting of the ballads of Robin Hood', 277-8.

²⁵ The author was probably 'an individual of some literary expertise, quite probably a clerk': R.B. Dobson and J. Taylor, 'The medieval origins of the Robin Hood legend: a reassessment', *Northern History*, vii (1972), 8; W.H. Clawson, *The Gest of Robin Hood* (Toronto, 1909), p. 128.

²⁶ Dobson and Taylor, 'The medieval origins of the Robin Hood legend: a reassessment', 10. They feel that there is a 'genuine possibility' that 'the legend positively owed much of its popularity to the southerners' ambivalent and imaginative attitude to regions further north'. Cf. David Wiles' view that it was communities in the south and west who, in the fifteenth century, 'incorporated the game of Robin Hood in the Whitsun festival': *The early plays of Robin Hood* (Woodbridge, 1981), p. 57. Douglas Gray has pointed out that if we are to regard the -e endings in *A Gest of Robyn Hode* as evidence of a date of 'c. 1400 or before', then they may well further suggest that the *Gest*, in the form which has come down to us, was not written in Yorkshire: D. Gray, 'The Robin Hood poems', *Poetica. An International Journal of Linguistic and Literary Studies*, xviii (1984), 23 n. 58.

²⁷ The identity of the clerk who actually drew up the garrison pay account for the period 18 October 1338 to 11 November 1340 is unknown, but overall responsibility for the payment of troops on the Isle of Wight at this time rested on the shoulders of John de Windsor - apparently another southerner. He had been keeper of the king's exchanges of London and Canterbury from December 1330 to May 1338 (*C(alendar of) F(ine) R(olls)*, 1327-1337, 211; *C(alendar of) P(atent) R(olls)*, 1338-1340, 83) and was king's gardener at Windsor castle from January 1336 (*CPR*, 1334-1338, 194).

to appear on this pay-roll? Perhaps the simplest explanation is that our archer's name was Robert Hood and the clerk, amused by the coincidence and in the face of normal scribal practice, used the diminutive 'Robin'. He may have been encouraged in this by the archer himself, who would probably be only too keen to bask in the celebrity status which allusion to the ballad hero would confer. Perhaps, like the hooded archer portrayed in the well-known illustration from the Luttrell Psalter,²⁸ our Robin Hood was a crack marksman with a bow—or (if the clerk intended heavy irony), a rather indifferent one. An alternative explanation is that the name Robin Hood was chosen by the archer himself as a professional alias or nickname. These are not unknown in this kind of military record, and although they most often consist of single names like 'Waldegraff',²⁹ 'Brounsmyth',³⁰ 'loncle' or 'lambequin',³¹ it would be perfectly understandable for archers in the king's service to model themselves on the greenwood heroes and to assume their names. A muster roll for the garrison of Edinburgh Castle from the autumn of 1335 may provide a relevant example. It includes an archer called Robert of Sherwood, who has been enlisted from the manpower of the city of York.³² Aliases, it will be remembered, are sometimes used by the principal characters of the Robin Hood ballads (as, for example, when Little John assumes the name Reynolde Grenelefe)³³ and, perhaps in imitation, by members of the criminal fraternity (and by the community around them) throughout the late Middle Ages. Thus, we find in Kent in 1313 a suspected murderer called 'Johannes dictus Petit Jehan de Shorne'³⁴ and the leader of a criminal band operating in Sussex in the early fifteenth century who assumed the name 'Friar Tuck'—though the latter may well be the original 'Tuck', rather than a borrowing from the legend.³⁵ Known cases of medieval criminals adopting the name of Robin Hood himself are admittedly scarce,³⁶ but it is likely, as Holt has argued, that the legend embodies 'the adventures of several distinct real outlaws, all borrowing the name and adding to the fame of the original'.³⁷

²⁸ Reproduced in Holt, *Robin Hood*, plate 9.

²⁹ E101/19/24 m. 12 (the Edinburgh castle garrison in May 1337).

³⁰ Among others on an undated roll of Sir Walter Hewitt's retinue: E101/35/2 m. 8.

³¹ R. A. Newhall, *Muster and Review* (Cambridge, Mass., 1940), p. 14 n. 28.

³² E101/19/21 m. 1.

³³ *A Gest of Robyn Hode*, stanza 149.

³⁴ Holt, *Robin Hood*, p. 190.

³⁵ Holt (*Robin Hood*, pp. 58–59) argues that this could be 'the first and original Friar Tuck'; but cf. David Wiles, who feels that 'it was probably the established place of Friar Tuck in the Robin Hood legend that caused the name to be lent to this individual': *The early plays of Robin Hood*, p. 25.

³⁶ For example, the alleged riotous assembly of Robert Marshall of Wednesbury, Staffordshire, alias Robin Hood, and a gang of followers at Willenhall in 1498—though in this case it is difficult to distinguish between purely criminal behaviour and over-zealous prosecution of the Robin Hood 'game': Holt, *Robin Hood*, pp. 58, 148–49; Wiles, *The early plays of Robin Hood*, p. 15.

³⁷ Holt, *Robin Hood*, pp. 58, 190–1.

There is another, rather less straightforward, explanation of the Robin Hood in the Isle of Wight garrison. It may have been a wholly fabricated name for a non-existent person. As common as the use of aliases was the clerical practice of inventing names when administrative conventions so demanded. There is a particularly striking example of this with a direct bearing on the Robin Hood legend. In 1432, a scribe filling in the return of MPs for Wiltshire needed a list of sureties, a list which he duly fabricated, but in a rather more imaginative way than was usual, for when the surnames are read vertically, the full range of greenwood heroes emerges—from Robin Hood to Adam Bell—as well as the little rhyme ‘*Robyn Hode inne grenewode stode, Godeman was hee*’.³⁸ Why should the clerk drawing up the Isle of Wight garrison account wish to include a false name on the roll? The explanation which immediately springs to mind is that the captain of the island garrison was claiming pay for men who did not exist. Fraudulent practice of this kind was by no means unknown in medieval armies and appears to have been particularly prevalent in garrison establishments.³⁹ It could arise from difficulties in recruitment: a captain, unable to meet the terms of his contract, might seek to conceal the fact from the Crown; but equally there were captains who would set out to make a profit through deliberate under-recruitment. The Crown was evidently aware of the danger of pay fraud on the Isle of Wight. In October 1347 an effort was made to establish whether the garrison maintained during the previous six months, by the keeper of the island and the keeper of Carisbrooke castle, had been of the proportions required by the terms of their indentures.⁴⁰ There is, however, no indication that the period of just over a year which includes the appearance of Robin Hood on the garrison roll gave rise to official suspicion at the time. Is there any reason for suspicion now?

Do the other names on the roll suggest the operation of a strategy of clerical invention? This would not appear to be the case as far as the other archers are concerned. Their names are entirely credible (including, for example, a fair sprinkling of men from southern England), although it must be admitted that, from our twentieth-century perspective, we may not notice what a fourteenth-century observer would perceive to be false. The possibility that all is not entirely what it seems is supported to some degree by the fact that among the hundred or so men-at-arms listed on the garrison roll is a certain ‘Richard de la Lee’.⁴¹ Can this simply be a coincidence, or is it a deliberate allusion to the knight of the *Gest*, Richard at the Lee? There was at least one Richard atte Lee who was militarily active at this time and who might be identified with the man-at-arms in the Isle of Wight garrison. From the summer of 1338, he had been serving with the earl of Northampton in the Low Countries,⁴² but if he is indeed the man on the Isle of Wight

³⁸ Holt, *Robin Hood*, pp. 69-70.

³⁹ For example, in Lancastrian Normandy: see Newhall, *Muster and review*, *passim*.

⁴⁰ CPR, 1345-1348, 459-60; S.F. Hockey, *Insula vecta. The Isle of Wight in the Middle Ages* (London & Chichester, 1982), p. 94.

⁴¹ E101/21/32 m. 3; there is a John atte Lee among the archers on m. 6.

⁴² Richard atte Lee, esquire received letters of protection in May and November 1338: *Treaty Rolls*, ii, 1337-1339 (London, 1972), nos. 290, 653. The earl of Northampton's retinue served in the Low Countries from 22 July 1338 to 20 February 1340: *The War-*

roll—who joined the garrison on 26 March 1339—then he must have returned to England about a year before the bulk of the king's army.⁴³ So the Richard de la Lee listed on the garrison roll might well be a real man, or—together with Robin Hood—the bearer of a rather colourful military alias, or part of a wider fabrication; we cannot be absolutely certain. On balance, however, an explanation relying upon pay fraud would seem to be the least convincing of the options.⁴⁴ The pay-roll exhibits no other features which might naturally cause a modern observer to be suspicious;⁴⁵ and conditions on the island were not really suitable for fraudulent behaviour, which would require captain and paymaster to be in collusion. Although several of the commanders, including Sir Theobald Russell and Sir John de Langeford, had the advantage of being influential island landowners with plenty of local contacts, overall military command of the island appears to have changed several times during the period of the pay account.⁴⁶ By contrast, a single garrison paymaster, John de Windsor, served throughout this time. There is every indication that he was a diligent and honest servant of the Crown. The frequent changes in manpower numbers which his garrison pay account exhibit, suggest that he conducted regular musters and was fastidious

drobe Book of William de Norwell, p. 327. A Richard de la Lee had been a member of the earl of Cornwall's retinue in Scotland in 1336 (E101/19/36 m. 1) and the name appears in various other military records of this period (e.g. E101/35/2 m. 10; C81/1750 no. 12). The man (perhaps, men) whose career in arms is considered here does not figure in John Bellamy's recent study, *Robin Hood: an historical enquiry*, Ch. 6: 'Sir Richard at the Lee'. The military connection between the Richard discussed here and the earl of Northampton may suggest, however, that he was a member of the atte Lee family of Hertfordshire (for that county represented one of the Bohun spheres of influence) which Bellamy believes to be highly significant in the development of the *Gest*.

⁴³ Whilst this is possible (Northampton's pay account does make allowance for *vacaciones*), it is perhaps more likely that we are seeing two different men with the same name.

⁴⁴ The name is highly conspicuous and, therefore, an unlikely choice if pay fraud was the intention: it would surely arouse the suspicion of the least diligent of auditors. So conspicuous a name as this might suggest the operation of a 'dead pays' system, whereby a captain would be permitted pay for a larger number of men than were actually serving: cf. C.G. Cruickshank, *Elizabeth's army* (2nd edn., Oxford, 1966), pp. 154-8. There is, however, no direct evidence for the operation of a 'dead pays' system in the fourteenth century. *Regard* payments, which began to be offered for field campaigns during the 1340s, appear to have been intended to perform a similar function.

⁴⁵ Altogether more suspicious is the exact correspondence between the indenture (E101/68/3 no. 44) and final account (E101/22/22) for Sir Theobald Russell's retinue of garrison troops, in the king's pay from 31 October 1339 to 31 August 1340. It is not simply that the planned numbers actually served, but that the indenture (sealed on 1 September 1339) specifies the names of men-at-arms and the periods during which they were to be present, and that these arrangements, involving a fairly complex scheme of staggered service, are reproduced in every particular on the pay-roll. It all seems extraordinarily neat.

⁴⁶ Hockey, *Insula vecta*, pp. 86-9.

in his record-keeping.⁴⁷ Fraudulent pay claims are usually expected to leave a rather different impression on the accounts.

There is a further possible explanation of the enigmatic Robin Hood on the Isle of Wight muster roll; an explanation which would bring us back to the proposition that the man listed *was* a real individual, whose name has been altered by the clerk drawing up the roll. To appreciate why he might have done this, it is necessary to consider the military and social context a little more fully. 'Robin' Hood makes his first known appearance in a Latin military record at a time when conditions were becoming very favourable for the development of the greenwood tales as we know them. The period of Edward III's wars in Scotland and France witnessed the rise of the archer as an essential component in the re-invigorated English military machine. To a considerable degree, it was the effective use of archery that was instrumental in raising English arms to the elevated position which they had achieved by the time of the treaty of Brétigny. This was a time when it was possible for an exploit like the capture of the castle of Guines, achieved under the leadership of an archer from the Calais garrison, John de Doncaster, to be celebrated by both chroniclers, like Geoffrey le Baker,⁴⁸ and the patriotic poet, Laurence Minot.⁴⁹ Equally, it should be no surprise that a collection of stories about the men of the greenwood which were increasingly gripping the popular imagination at this time should contain such a prominent role for archery.⁵⁰ Many of the earliest literary allusions to the Robin Hood ballads make reference to archery, such as the often quoted proverb which runs: '*And many men speken of Robyn Hood, / And shotte nevere in his bowe*'.⁵¹ But the appearance of a Bowman called 'Robyn Hod' on the Isle of Wight garrison roll is more revealing. It certainly suggests that archery was already a notable feature of the legend by c. 1340;⁵² but it also tends to confirm that there was a strong association between, on the one hand, the evolution of the legend and, on the other, the emergence of a military machine in which bowmen were playing so prominent a part.

⁴⁷ E101/21/32; on muster and review in the fourteenth century, see Andrew Ayton, *The warhorse and military service under Edward III* (Hull Ph.D thesis, 1990), pp. 186-9.

⁴⁸ *Chronicon Galfridi le Baker de Swynebroke*, ed. E.M. Thompson (Oxford, 1889), pp. 116-18, 284-6. Cf. Robert de Avesbury, who describes John de Doncaster as '*sagittarius Anglicus de stipendiariis in Caley*': Adae Murimuth, *Continuatio chronicarum & Robertus de Avesbury, De gestis mirabilibus regis Edwardi tertii*, ed. E.M. Thompson (London, 1889), p. 414.

⁴⁹ *The poems of Laurence Minot*, ed. J. Hall (2nd edn., Oxford, 1897), pp. 34-6, 94-7.

⁵⁰ The archery in the tales is by no means the sole preserve of the greenwood company. Thus, for example, in *A Gest of Robyn Hode*, the Sheriff of Nottingham calls on '*all the best archers of the north*' to participate in a grand archery contest (stanzas 282-95); and, later, the king orders an array of archers '*of all the wyde contre*' (stanza 326).

⁵¹ Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes of Robyn Hood*, p. 2. The earliest known version of this particular proverb, penned by Geoffrey Chaucer, dates from the 1380s.

⁵² Cf. the sculpture (c. 1340) of a hooded figure, leaning on his bow, in a spandrel of the north aisle of Beverley Minster. It is, Sir James Holt has observed, very reminiscent of the rhyme '*Robin Hood in Sherwood/Barnsdale stood*': Holt, *Robin Hood*, p. 193.

It is necessary to stress the parallel importance of archery in the tales and in mid fourteenth-century English society, because Sir James Holt, perhaps the most influential of contributors to the Robin Hood debate, has argued very forcefully that archery is *not* a significant guide to the dating of the ballads as we have them. Archery, he suggests, was an important feature of the English social and military scene for well over a century before Crécy.⁵³ That the bow had played a part in thirteenth-century warfare cannot be denied, but for the regular employment of very large numbers of archers in royal armies we must wait until Edward I's wars at the very end of the century. It was, moreover, only in Edward III's reign that massed archery was fully integrated into a carefully planned, yet very simple, tactical system; a system which was emerging during the Scottish campaigns of the 1330s, attaining full development on the battlefields—and in countless smaller engagements—in France.⁵⁴ One need only glance at the basic structure of English armies during the Hundred Years War to recognise the fundamental importance of the archer. The 'ideal' mid fourteenth-century army possessed roughly equal numbers of men-at-arms and archers, but not infrequently the bowmen considerably outnumbered their more heavily armoured comrades, sometimes by about two to one. By Henry V's reign, the standard ratio was three to one, and by the 1440s and 1450s, it was at times nearer to ten to one.⁵⁵ More important than numbers was quality. The shire levies of Edward I's reign were unwieldy, ill-disciplined and poorly equipped;⁵⁶ the archers serving in the magnate retinues of Edward III's campaigns were a totally different manner of fighting men. The 1330s saw the emergence of the 'horse archer' whose military effectiveness depended not simply on his battlefield combination with dismounted men-at-arms, but also on the fact that being mounted, he could play a crucial role in the hard-hitting, fast-moving *chevauchées*, which characterised the English method of campaigning in France.

The mounted archers who fought in the Hundred Years War were better paid, better equipped and militarily more effective than the bowmen of Edward I's armies; and they tended to be drawn from a wealthier social group. The necessity of serving with a horse, albeit a hackney worth perhaps twenty shillings,⁵⁷ restricted the pool of available manpower:⁵⁸ the contingent of 5,500 mounted archers in the powerful royal army of 1359-60

⁵³ Holt, *Robin Hood*, pp. 79-80, 142-5, which restates the view of J.C. Holt, 'Robin Hood: some comments', *Past and Present*, xix (1961), 16. This was an attempt to counter arguments offered by Maurice Keen in *The outlaws of medieval legend* (Revised paperback edition, London, 1987), pp. 138-9.

⁵⁴ For a survey of archery during this period, see J. Bradbury, *The medieval archer* (Woodbridge, 1985), Ch. 5 & 6.

⁵⁵ Ayton, *The warhorse and military service under Edward III*, pp. 9-13.

⁵⁶ M. Prestwich, *War, politics and finance under Edward I* (London, 1972), Ch. iv.

⁵⁷ Evidence for the quality of horse archers' mounts is not plentiful. An account for Sir Thomas Dagworth's retinue, serving in Brittany in 1346, includes a compensation claim, at a flat rate of 20 shillings per horse, for 120 mounted archer hackneys which had been lost (E101/25/17).

⁵⁸ On the changes in the social composition of the military community, see Philip Morgan, *War and society in medieval Cheshire 1277-1403* (Manchester, 1987), pp. 37-41.

was exceptionally large for the fourteenth-century phase of the war.⁵⁹ Many of these horse archers were men of yeoman stock: 'minor landholders, not gentry, but a cut above the ordinary peasant husbandman';⁶⁰ just the kind of 'good yeomen', then, whose virtues are extolled by the surviving late medieval ballads of Robin Hood and to whom these tales appear to be addressed.⁶¹ Whilst stressing the importance of the 'yeoman archer', we must recognise that the constituency of Edwardian mounted archers was a complex social group. On the one hand, it was by no means distinct and separate from the section of society which generally served as men-at-arms in royal armies. It might include the younger sons from those minor gentry families which could not afford to provide all their menfolk with the necessary armour and war-horses. Then there were men with specialist training: the foresters and parkers whom commissioners of array were sometimes exhorted to seek-out for enlistment.⁶² Chaucer, it will be recalled, presented a portrait of such a man, the knight's yeoman, in the General Prologue of the *Canterbury Tales*.⁶³ But, equally, there would be men of obscure origins who had adopted the military life as a serious career. There were many such professionals: 'young fellows', to quote Sir Thomas Gray, 'who hitherto had been of but small account ... gathered from different parts of England ... many of them beginning as archers and then becoming some knights, some captains ...'⁶⁴ In truth, few were as successful as Sir Robert Knolles, whose long campaigning life took him from

⁵⁹ A.E. Prince, 'The strength of English armies in the reign of Edward III', *English Historical Review*, xlii (1931), 368; cf. the 25,700 infantry on the royal pay-roll at the time of the battle of Falkirk in 1298 (Prestwich, *War, politics and finance under Edward I*, p. 95).

⁶⁰ Keen, *The outlaws of medieval legend*, p. xviii; Morgan, *War and society in medieval Cheshire 1277-1403*, p. 41.

⁶¹ Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes of Robyn Hood*, pp. 34-6; *idem.*, 'Robin Hood of Barnesdale: a fellow thou has long sought [Review article]', *Northern History*, xix (1983), 218-19. Also, P.R. Coss, 'Aspects of cultural diffusion in medieval England: the early romances, local society and Robin Hood', *Past and Present*, cviii (1985), 73-76, especially p. 74 n. 145 for an excellent discussion of the use of the term 'yeoman' in *A Gest of Robyn Hode*. Whilst Coss's interpretation of the term 'is broadly in line with that of Dobson and Taylor', he concludes that 'it needs to be understood not only as a social gradation [between the armigerous on the one hand and the tillers of the soil on the other] but also in relation to the confusion of status and status terminology that was a feature of late fourteenth-century England'.

⁶² For example, in 1340: C76/15 mm. 27d, 29d. Among the archers listed on the roll of the Isle of Wight garrison in 1338-39 are five with the surname '(le) Parker' and one 'le Forester': E101/21/32.

⁶³ 'A forster was he, soothly, as I gesse': *The complete works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F.N. Robinson (2nd edn., London, 1957), p. 18. The similarity between Chaucer's pen-portrait of the knight's yeoman and ballad descriptions of Robin Hood has not gone unnoticed: Holt, *Robin Hood*, pp. 121-2.

⁶⁴ *Scalacronica, the reigns of Edward I, Edward II and Edward III, as recorded by Sir Thomas Gray*, ed. & trans. Sir H. Maxwell (Glasgow, 1907), pp. 131, 134.

archer of obscure background to routier captain and the joint-leader of an English royal army; or Knolles' kinsman, the less well-known Sir Hugh Browe, the son of a yeoman of Tushingham, Cheshire, who also probably began his military career as a bowman.⁶⁵ The majority did not manage this kind of social advancement. Indeed, by becoming reliant upon service in the king's armies during a period of essentially intermittent warfare, many men in the 'military pool' were condemned to lengthy periods of unemployment. For those who lacked property, family or a permanent position in a magnate's household to return to, there were several options. They could join one of the Companies living off the countryside in France, or perhaps travel to Italy where the talents of the English bowman were much sought after. Alternatively, they could return to England and take to the greenwood where their skill with a bow and their experience of the tough campaigning life would at least enable them to survive. For some, this course of action would arise from a failure to settle back into civil society, perhaps (as we see, for example, in the *Outlaw's Song of Trailbaston*)⁶⁶ because of miscarriages of justice; perhaps because, like many veterans of modern conflicts, war had altered their perspective on life. Some, no doubt, preferred the freedom of the greenwood and, like Robin Hood in the ballads, would have rejected offers of settled, but claustrophobic, employment in a noble household. An intriguing passage in the *Anonimale Chronicle* seems to offer a glimpse of such men as these. The convoy bringing the captive King John II of France to London in 1357 is apprehended by a crowd of several hundred green-clad men, equipped 'as if they were a band of robbers and evil-doers, with bows and arrows, swords and bucklers'. The French king is justifiably dismayed, but the Black Prince assures him that these were Englishmen 'living rough in the forest by choice, and that it was their habit to array themselves so every day'.⁶⁷ This is the view of a military commander who recognised the importance of maintaining reserves of suitable manpower; but, equally, we must be aware of the many old soldiers (of whom Wyclif so heartily disapproved) who were reduced to beggary⁶⁸—and the many who resorted to serious crime.

The return of unemployed soldiers had, no doubt, always been a disruptive influence in civil society—and the problem was by no means confined to England;⁶⁹ but it was a

⁶⁵ On Knolles and Browe, see M.J. Bennett, *Community, Class and Careerism. Cheshire and Lancashire Society in the Age of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 182.

⁶⁶ Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes of Robyn Hood*, pp. 250-4; Prestwich, *War, politics and finance under Edward I*, pp. 289-90.

⁶⁷ *The Anonimale Chronicle, 1333-1381*, ed. V.H. Galbraith (Manchester, 1927), pp. 40-1; translation in Holt, *Robin Hood*, p. 158.

⁶⁸ H.B. Workman, *John Wyclif* (2 vols., Oxford, 1926), ii. 303; John Wyclif, *Sermones*, ed. I. Loserth (4 vols., Wyclif Society, London, 1889), ii. 341-2.

⁶⁹ On those who were *vivans sur le pays* in Lancastrian Normandy, see A. Curry, 'The first English standing army?—military organisation in Lancastrian Normandy, 1420-1450', *Patronage, pedigree and power in later medieval England*, ed. C. Ross (Gloucester, 1979), pp. 200, 203 n. 58; C. Allmand, *Lancastrian Normandy* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 209-10; A.J. Pollard, *John Talbot and the war in France, 1427-1453* (London, 1983), p.

problem which appears have grown significantly during the fourteenth century, as large numbers of young men returned from the continent and endeavoured to perpetuate a lifestyle which they had found both exhilarating and perhaps profitable whilst in the king's pay in France.⁷⁰ The control of gangs of men who, in the words of a statute of 1360, 'have been plunderers and robbers beyond the sea and are now returned and go wandering and will not work as they were used to do before this time', proved a very severe headache for the authorities in England.⁷¹ A temporary respite was offered by the resumption of war. The proclamation of a new campaign would draw many unemployed soldiers back to the ports of embarkation (or the muster centre for a Scottish campaign) and by resuming their careers in the king's armies, those who had been engaged in criminal activity during their sojourn in the greenwood could hope to earn charters of pardon.⁷² Such service was not infrequently unpaid, however, and it was normal for the issue of a pardon to be accompanied by a range of conditions, including a further lengthy period of military duty.⁷³ It would, therefore, take a while for the slate to be wiped clean and we can imagine that many men would find themselves locked into the greenwood life for long periods, only escaping temporarily to join an expedition or a garrison. It is not easy to estimate the numbers of men involved, for the lists of pardons which appear on Chancery enrolments are unlikely to be complete,⁷⁴ whilst in some cases, as with the multitude of pardon recipients following the Halidon Hill campaign in 1333, we might reasonably suspect fraudulent practice on a large scale.⁷⁵ Moreover, whilst it is evident that hundreds of men received charters of pardon at the end of major expeditions,⁷⁶ it is far from clear what proportion were drawn from the military

92. For later fifteenth-century England, see A. Goodman, *The Wars of the Roses* (London, 1981), p. 223. Cf. fifteenth-century Switzerland: M. Vale, *War and chivalry* (London, 1981), pp. 154-5.

⁷⁰ H.J. Hewitt, *The organisation of war under Edward III* (Manchester, 1966), pp. 172-5; Bennett, *Community, class and careerism*, p. 184.

⁷¹ C.G. Crump and C. Johnson, 'The powers of the justices of the peace', *English Historical Review*, xxvii (1912), 227; cf. for 1376: *Rotuli Parliamentorum* (6 vols., London, 1783), ii. 332.

⁷² The granting of large numbers of pardons in return for military service had been introduced as a recruiting device in the mid 1290s: Prestwich, *War, politics and finance under Edward I*, pp. 104-5. On the early history of 'service pardons', see N.D. Hurnard, *The king's pardon for homicide before A.D. 1307* (Oxford, 1969), pp. 247-50, 311-26. There was a continuous stream of complaints about the system: see Hewitt, *The organisation of war under Edward III*, pp. 174-5.

⁷³ Hewitt, *The organisation of war under Edward III*, pp. 29-30; Ayton, *The warhorse and military service under Edward III*, pp. 182-3.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

⁷⁵ It is likely that many pardon recipients recorded on the Scots roll (C71/13) did not actually take up arms for this campaign: R. Nicholson, *Edward III and the Scots* (Oxford, 1965), p. 130.

⁷⁶ Hewitt, *The organisation of war under Edward III*, p. 30. At least 1,800 pardons were awarded for service during the siege of Calais, but this was exceptional.

community of the greenwood. There would, after all, be many ordinary citizens seeking to escape the consequences of one-off crimes; and there would be professional gangsters, like the Folvilles, who periodically seized an opportune moment to come to terms with the authorities through the performance of a period of military service.⁷⁷ The sources—the lists of enrolled pardons and files of warrants—are certainly not free of interpretive problems, but they are a largely untapped source and a systematic exploration of them would undoubtedly contribute a great deal to our understanding of the processes of military recruitment and the composition of a very distinctive section of the military community. It might also cast light on the development of the Robin Hood legend in the middle decades of the fourteenth century. A glance through the several thousand pardons enrolled on the Scots roll after the victorious Halidon Hill campaign serves as a good example. Here we see men who have been poaching and, indeed, robbing monks in Sherwood Forest,⁷⁸ but the most interesting entry concerns a certain ‘William Robyn’, who is receiving a charter of pardon for the murder of the extremely oddly named, ‘Gode Roger’.⁷⁹ Is it entirely fanciful to see in this an ironic allusion to the story of Robin Hood, which ends with the death of the greenwood hero through treachery, but not before he has decapitated one of the perpetrators of his downfall, a certain *Roger de Doncaster*?⁸⁰

A discussion of the men who made their careers as archers in the king’s service, who resided in the greenwood during breaks in the wars, only to return to active service when the opportunity presented itself (and in some cases thereby earning a royal pardon), brings us naturally back to the enigmatic Robin Hood in the Isle of Wight garrison in 1338-39—for he could well have been such a man as this. He may have been a southerner, like many of his comrades in the garrison; and where better, indeed, to emulate Robin Hood’s deeds than in the New Forest, just across the Solent from the Isle of Wight. There is plentiful evidence for the existence of organised bands of unemployed soldiers in southern England, within convenient distance of the ports of embarkation.⁸¹ Our Robin might even have

⁷⁷ C71/13 mm. 4, 17: enrolled charters of pardon for Eustace, Robert and Walter de Folville and John Lovet; cf. E.L.G. Stones, ‘The Folvilles of Ashby-Folville, Leicestershire, and their associates in crime, 1326-47’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th. series, vii (1957), 120-1, 128-9. For the Gresleys of Staffordshire, see M. Prestwich, *The three Edwards. War and state in England, 1272-1377* (London, 1980), pp. 231-2.

⁷⁸ C71/13 m. 13; J.E. Morris, ‘Introduction’, *A copy of papers relating to musters, beacons, subsidies etc. in the county of Northampton, A.D. 1586-1623*, ed. Joan Wake. Northamptonshire Record Society, iii (1926 for 1925), p. xxxix.

⁷⁹ C71/13 m. 11.

⁸⁰ Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes of Robin Hood*, pp. 111-12, 133-9 (*A Gest of Robyn Hode*, stanzas 451-56; *Robin Hoode, his Death*). We should not be surprised to find such colourful invention amongst the enrolled pardons for the Halidon Hill campaign: see above n. 75.

⁸¹ For the depredations of an armed gang of war veterans and other criminals, working in Wiltshire, Berkshire and Hampshire in 1363, see Crump and Johnson, ‘The powers of the justices of the peace’, 228, 236-7. Cf. Cheshire: P.H.W. Booth, ‘Taxation and public

become notorious on the Isle of Wight itself. Although apparently a far cry from Barnsdale and Sherwood, or indeed the haunts of Adam Bell and his comrades in the western Marches, the Isle of Wight in the later 1330s had something in common with these more obviously unruly locations. Evidence of a certain amount of criminal activity is only to be expected, but what we find are signs of organised extortion: seizure and imprisonment until ransoms are paid, the direction of letters to wealthy churchmen and laymen, 'demanding money with threats, imprisoning such as do not obey them' and the disruption of the proceedings of law courts.⁸² Even allowing for the exaggeration of complainants, the parallels with the activities of the greenwood fraternity in the outlaw tales are indeed striking. That the Isle of Wight should have been troubled by its own local 'Robin Hoods' is actually not particularly surprising, for it offered an environment in which lawlessness was likely to flourish. In wartime, the island was a strategic location of the first importance: an essential, if exposed, bulwark of the south coast's defence arrangements and, potentially, a bridgehead for enemies of the English Crown. Intermittently throughout the later Middle Ages (and certainly during the later 1330s) the islanders faced the prospect of maritime raids or even invasion. The Crown's reaction to the danger from the sea—stern warnings to those thinking of fleeing to the mainland and periodic bolstering of the garrison and the island's defences⁸³—can only have contributed to an atmosphere of profound unease. To the stresses attendant upon the expectation of raids must be added the damage inflicted by them on the island's economy. Following a maritime attack in the autumn of 1338, for example, the islanders were granted a period of respite from payment of the lay subsidy.⁸⁴ Here, then, were conditions of insecurity, instability and hardship, comparable to some degree with those which so often prevailed in the northern Marcher counties.

The island was a frontier zone and, appropriately enough, was heavily militarised. A population attuned to the needs of defence was, during periods of tension, reinforced by a substantial garrison paid for by the Crown; and the military personnel of the island were backed-up by the solid bastion of Carisbrooke castle. The castle certainly was a crucial component in the island's defence: in 1377 it was the stout resistance by Sir Hugh Tyrel's men at Carisbrooke which prevented the island from being completely over-run by a substantial French and Castilian raiding force.⁸⁵ But on many occasions the mobilised manpower of the island proved the equal of the raiders from the sea. The most colourful descriptions of island defence concern events at the start of the fifteenth century.⁸⁶ It is, for

order: Cheshire in 1353', *Northern History*, xii (1976), 28-9.

⁸² CPR, 1338-1340, 70; cf. CPR, 1334-1338, 510.

⁸³ On this, see Hockey, *Insula vecta*, Ch. 5; R. Worsley, *The history of the Isle of Wight* (London, 1781, repr. 1975), pp. 35-8.

⁸⁴ CCR, 1337-1339, 506, 540; CCR, 1339-1341, 91, 103; Hockey, *Insula vecta*, pp. 87-8.

⁸⁵ Hockey, *Insula vecta*, pp. 99-100.

⁸⁶ The raids of the early years of the French war are not well documented. About a raid in August 1340, for example, little more is known than that one of the leaders of the island community, Sir Theobald Russell, was killed in the fighting: Murimuth, *Continuatio Chroniconum*, p. 109 n. 6; Hockey, *Insula vecta*, pp. 90-1.

example, with some relish that Walsingham describes the repulse of a French attack in December 1403: the enemy 'were compelled to relinquish their booty and rush to the ships, not without ridicule and loss'.⁸⁷ Another raid, soon after, met with an equally effective response, but on this occasion, significantly, the description comes from the pen of one of the raiders, Gutierre Diaz de Gamez. He tells how a small party of men went ashore 'but in an instant so many archers appeared that the little troop turned very quickly back to the sea. Other men then landed from the galleys, and skirmished a moment with the English; but these came up in such numbers that they [the raiders] had to go on board again. ... They say that as many as 1500 men dwell [on the island] and that the most of them are archers'.⁸⁸ Although this account dates from over half a century after the name of the outlaw hero had appeared amongst the island garrison, it offers a vivid impression of the military context in which the Robin Hood of the 1338 pay-roll really ought to be placed. At the time when Robin joined its ranks on 21 November 1338, a short while after the autumn raid of that year, the paid garrison of the island was quite substantial: 170 archers, together with fifteen men-at-arms and three hobelars⁸⁹ —and this in addition to fighting men supplied by local landowners and those who could be raised by a general call to arms in an emergency. The peak strength during this phase of the war was reached in the early autumn of 1339 when there were nearly one hundred men-at-arms and well over two hundred archers and hobelars in the paid garrison;⁹⁰ and where information is available we can see significant numbers of men in the king's pay at various times throughout the thirteen-forties.⁹¹ Their toponymic surnames suggest that some of the personnel of the paid garrison were drawn from the men of the island, but it is equally clear that many of the troops came from the mainland.⁹² Whatever their origins, we would expect to find some representatives from the greenwood community among them. There certainly were some criminals serving in the garrison: men like Walter atte Beche, a murderer, who in the spring of 1340 was pardoned (though not without the usual strings attached) following service on the Isle of Wight.⁹³ If complaints such as that which led to the appointment of a commission of oyer and terminer in February 1338 to investigate organised crime on the island are justified,⁹⁴ then there

⁸⁷ *English Historical Documents*, iv, 1327-1485, ed. A.R. Myers (London, 1969), no. 89 (pp. 194-5).

⁸⁸ *The Unconquered Knight. A chronicle of the deeds of Don Pero Niño, count of Buelna, by his standard-bearer Gutierre Diaz de Gamez*, trans. & ed. Joan Evans (London, 1928), p. 130.

⁸⁹ E101/21/32.

⁹⁰ E101/21/32; E101/22/22; A.E. Prince, 'The indenture system under Edward III', *Historical essays in honour of James Tait*, ed. J.G. Edwards, V.H. Galbraith and E.F. Jacob (Manchester, 1933), p. 286 n. 7.

⁹¹ For example, indentures provided for the employment of sixty men-at-arms and eighty archers on the island during the spring and summer of 1347: E101/68/3 no. 67; CCR, 1346-1349, 248.

⁹² John de Windsor was ordered to draw upon the manpower resources of the mainland: C76/14 m. 10 (March 1339). Cf. 1371: Hockey, *Insula vecta*, p. 98.

⁹³ CPR, 1338-1340, 457.

⁹⁴ CPR, 1338-1340, 70.

would have been no shortage of recruits from the local population. In the light of this, it is easy to see how, when faced by a new recruit who may well have acquired fleeting local notoriety as a greenwood bandit, the clerk drawing up the Isle of Wight muster roll in November 1338 recorded his presence under a name which he felt to be fitting—Robin Hood. He may, of course, have been prompted by the man's use of an alias; but we should also consider the possibility that during the fourteenth century the name 'Robin Hood' became associated with a particular *kind* of outlaw.

By the 1260s, as we have seen, the name appears already to have become a recognised nickname for fugitives from the law. By the fifteenth century it was associated with *collective* criminal activity based in the greenwood. Thus in 1439, Piers Venables and his gang who, '*beynge of his clothinge ... and, in manere of insurrection, wente into the wodes*', were likened to Robin Hood and his '*meyne*'.⁹⁵ There are reasons for believing that, rather earlier than this, the name of the greenwood hero had become particularly associated with a section of the criminal fraternity, composed primarily of unemployed soldiers biding their time until their next campaign. It is their distinctive life-style which the early Robin Hood ballads appear to portray so vividly. Robin lives outside conventional civil society, apparently by choice; no other explanation is provided.⁹⁶ He and his men are unmarried and appear to lack close family ties or property. They are, like many of the military professionals of the time, free agents and though their living conditions seem very hard to outsiders like the sheriff of Nottingham,⁹⁷ they are tough men, accustomed to the outdoor life. Robin is an expert archer, '*On of the best that yever bare bou*',⁹⁸ and he is surrounded by men of similar skills; indeed, a very large body of men: seven score according to the *Gest*. This number is admittedly a fairly conventional one in outlaw tales,⁹⁹ yet so large a company of '*yonge men of prys*' would suggest that Robin's was no ordinary outlaw band, for these tended to consist of fewer men than this.¹⁰⁰ When called upon to fight, Robin's company performs with great proficiency; indeed, they appear most at home when driving off the sheriff's men, either with bow (as after the archery contest in the *Gest*) or sword (as during their raid on Nottingham to rescue Sir Richard at the Lee).¹⁰¹ Such exploits, and indeed the manning of the walls of Sir Richard's castle, would come naturally to men who had made a career in the use of arms. In addition to their technical skills, we should note the general demeanour of the outlaw band. Robin behaves with knightly courtesy, being

⁹⁵ Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes of Robyn Hood*, pp. 3-4; Holt, *Robin Hood*, pp. 149-51.

⁹⁶ Unlike, for example, the *Tale of Gamelyn*: Keen, *The outlaws of medieval England*, Ch. vii.

⁹⁷ *A Gest of Robyn Hode*, stanzas 196-8.

⁹⁸ *Robin Hood and the Potter*, stanza 2.

⁹⁹ The sheriff has seven score men in *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne* (stanza 13) and there are a similar number of outlaws in the *Tale of Gamelyn* (*Middle English metrical romances*, ed. W.H. French and C.B. Hale (New York, 1930), p. 227).

¹⁰⁰ Bellamy, *Robin Hood*, p. 117; *idem.*, *Crime and public order in England in the later Middle Ages* (London, 1973), pp. 70-2.

¹⁰¹ *A Gest of Robyn Hode*, stanzas 299-300; 350.

well disposed towards a knight or an esquire '*that wol be a gode felawe*'; and both he and his men show themselves conversant with the mechanics of bastard feudalism, though disinclined to join a magnate's permanent household staff. Such an outlook would seem entirely natural for men who had become accustomed to campaign service in knightly retinues on short-term subcontracts.¹⁰² They would, thereby, have been able to rub shoulders with members of the chivalric class and yet maintain a healthy independent spirit.

Audiences in the later Middle Ages may well have interpreted the circumstances of Robin Hood and his men in these terms. This is not to say that the Robin Hood ballads are no more than stories of unemployed war veterans living in the greenwood between campaigns; it is not as simple as that. There are, after all, no direct references in the ballads to the king's wars; nor indeed is there any indication that Robin or any of his men are inclined to abandon the greenwood life in order to join an overseas expedition. What this paper seeks to suggest is that the traditional outlaw tales, of which those concerning Robin Hood became the most enduringly popular, were distinctively coloured by the prolonged experience of war in the later medieval period. This was, no doubt, because the character of the outlaw community itself was altered by substantial influxes of returned soldiers. Men had taken to the greenwood during the aftermath of civil conflict in the 1260s and again in the 1320s (and some historians have argued that we should trace the origins of the Robin Hood legend to the doings of such bands of rebels), yet from the end of the thirteenth century the effect of *national* warfare on the composition of the outlaw population in England was altogether more significant. Existing outlaw bands would have been greatly augmented and in some parts of England probably overshadowed by a flood of restless, demobilised men. As they became absorbed into the outlaw community which had given rise to the greenwood tales, so by a process of 'infection', the war veterans became 'Robin Hoods'. But given their numbers and their distinctive characteristics— and in particular a taste for operating in the countryside 'arrayed as for war'—it is not difficult to see how their colourful activities could affect the image of the outlaw community as perceived by the population at large. It is only a small step further to see how the albeit idealised portrayal of outlaw life in the Robin Hood ballads began to take on some of the characteristics of this most distinctive section of the greenwood community. Thus it was, that whilst the veterans very soon became 'Robin Hoods', Robin Hood and his men in the tales began themselves to look like and to behave like war veterans.

It is, perhaps, within a framework of interpretation such as this that the most satisfactory reading of the Robin Hood on the Isle of Wight pay-roll is to be found. It would appear that the clerk compiling the roll had been confronted by a man for whom the name 'Robyn Hod' had seemed particularly appropriate. He was certainly an archer, but he may also have been an outlaw of a distinctive kind: there must surely have been

¹⁰² For recent work on military contracts, see A. Goodman, 'The military subcontracts of Sir Hugh Hastings, 1380', *English Historical Review*, xciv (1980), 114-20; S.K. Walker, 'Profit and loss in the Hundred Years War: the subcontracts of Sir John Strother, 1374', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, lviii (1985), 100-6.

something exceptional about him for the clerk to have breached normal scribal conventions. But was not the early winter of 1338 rather too early in the century for the relationship between the military community of the greenwood and the Robin Hood ballads yet to have been formed? Could the clerk have been able to perceive the connection? The French war had only just begun: the great victories of massed archery in France and the hordes of demobilised soldiery returning from the continent were phenomena of the future. Thus, whilst it might be reasonable to argue that a *hundred years* of intermittent warfare in France would, by the mid fifteenth century (the date of the earliest manuscript ballads) have left a clear mark on both the character of the Robin Hood legend and on the perspective of the audience, is it not likely that the versions which were circulating in the late 1330s would be rather different? The *Tale of Gamelyn*, it will be recalled, is of mid fourteenth-century date, but contains no trace of archery; the hero of the story uses a staff to overcome his opponents.¹⁰³ Such objections may carry a certain amount of weight, but they are not decisively damaging. It may well be true that the most dramatic flood of returning soldiers occurred during the peace of Brétigny, but regular large scale campaigning had been a feature of English life since Edward I's reign and the kind of disruptive activity perpetrated by unemployed war veterans during pauses in Edward III's continental war can also be perceived during the reign of his grandfather.¹⁰⁴ At the start of the French war there were already large numbers of hardened veterans from Edward III's military enterprises in Scotland. The mounted archer had appeared for the first time in the pay records in 1334 and massed archery had been used to devastating effect at Dupplin Moor (1332) and Halidon Hill (1333).¹⁰⁵ In addition, as has been suggested already, in interpreting the presence of Robin Hood on the Isle of Wight, the local context would seem to be of the utmost importance. We would expect the largest concentrations of unemployed soldiers to be near southern ports of embarkation and, perhaps, London. Moreover, since at least the mid 1290s, the Isle of Wight had become accustomed to maintaining a state of military vigilance,¹⁰⁶ living on its nerves during times of international tension. Its separation from

¹⁰³ Keen, *The outlaws of medieval legend*, p. 139.

¹⁰⁴ Prestwich, *War, politics and finance under Edward I*, pp. 289-90; Hurnard, *The king's pardon for homicide*, pp. 322-4. *An Outlaw's Song of Trailbaston*, dating from about 1305, is the tale of an ex-soldier, veteran of campaigns in Flanders, Scotland and Gascony, who, having been harshly treated by the law, takes refuge in 'the wood of Belregard': Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes of Robyn Hood*, pp. 250-4. Cf. Alan Harding, 'Early trailbaston proceedings from the Lincoln roll of 1305', *Medieval legal records edited in memory of C.A.F. Meekings*, ed. R.F. Hunnisett and J.B. Post (London, 1978), pp. 146-7.

¹⁰⁵ 'In this batayle [Halidon Hill] wonne the archeres of Ynglond a perpetual laude': so wrote John Capgrave in the mid fifteenth century (*The chronicle of England*, ed. F.C. Hingeston (London, Rolls series, 1858), p. 202); but contemporaries of the battle were fully aware of the crucial role played by the English archers in the defeat of the Scots: Nicholson, *Edward III and the Scots*, p. 136.

¹⁰⁶ In 1295 the traitor Thomas Turberville drew attention to the fact that 'Ille de Wycht est saunz garde': J.G. Edwards, 'The treason of Thomas Turberville, 1295', *Studies in medieval history presented to F.M. Powicke*, ed. R.W. Hunt, W.A. Pantin & R.W.

the mainland must have made it seem as much a prison as an island fortress; and with a garrison expanding and contracting according to changing military needs and the vagaries of royal policy, so the island would have had to endure the uncomfortable and disruptive presence of a pool of manpower awaiting re-engagement—a presence which can hardly have been welcomed in a community already prone to organised crime. It may, therefore, have been with a sense of very considerable relief that forty-three archers, including our Robin Hood, were enrolled into the paid garrison of the island in November 1338.

William Langland's famous mention of the 'rymes of Robyn Hood', dating from the late 1370s, has long been regarded as a bench-mark in Robin Hood studies.¹⁰⁷ With it, the greenwood hero has indisputably arrived on the literary scene. After Langland, further mentions of, or allusions to, the ballads 'proliferate in a surprising variety of sources': there are about a dozen further references by about 1450.¹⁰⁸ The timing of this burst of interest should occasion no surprise, since conditions during the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were indeed propitious for the growth of the Robin Hood legend. This was a period which witnessed, on the one hand, an 'extraordinary blossoming of English as a literary language';¹⁰⁹ whilst, on the other, the increasing self-confidence of the yeoman landowner, the enhancement of whose fortunes forms one of the most notable economic and social developments of the century after the Black Death.¹¹⁰ So much the most influential of recent commentators on the greenwood tales have been at pains to point out; but that this period did indeed offer 'optimum conditions for the extraordinary expansion of the Robin Hood legend' was in part the consequence of one further fundamentally important influence which, whilst playing a part in both the flowering of literary English and the rise of the yeomanry, had a more varied effect on English society. This, as we have seen, was the influence of war. The Robin Hood legend was affected, indeed stimulated, by the experience of war in a number of ways: by the prominent role of archery in the English military machine, by the impact of demobilised soldiery on the character of the greenwood community—and also, in all probability, by the active encouragement of the military community itself. To the men accustomed to the active military life—both those with settled circumstances to return to, either in their own homes or as retainers and dependents in the halls of the aristocracy, and those who took to the greenwood when not on campaign—the tales of Robin Hood would have provided an extremely appealing form of entertainment. Such men could easily identify with stories which championed the 'good

Southern (Oxford, 1948), p. 298. For the Crown's response to the threat to the south coast at this time, see A.Z. Freeman, 'A moat defensive: the coast defense scheme of 1295', *Speculum*, xlii (1967), 442-62 (on the Isle of Wight, see pp. 454-8).

¹⁰⁷ Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes of Robyn Hood*, p. 1.

¹⁰⁸ Maddicott 'The birth and setting of the ballads of Robin Hood', 277-8; J.C. Holt and Toshiyuki Takamiya, 'A new version of "A Rhyme of Robin Hood"', *English Manuscript Studies, 1100-1700*, i (1989), 213-21.

¹⁰⁹ Holt, *Robin Hood*, p. 115.

¹¹⁰ Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes of Robyn Hood*, pp. 35-6; *idem.*, 'Robin Hood of Barnesdale: a fellow thou has long sought', 218-19.

yeoman' and in which the skills of archery figured so prominently. The availability of such a ready audience among the military community, together with the increasingly high profile which such men were occupying in the life of the kingdom, must have contributed in no small degree to the apparent increase in the popularity of the Robin Hood tales from the middle of the fourteenth century. Thus although the wars in Scotland and France do not impinge directly on the Robin Hood tales, the dramatic increase in the legend's popularity cannot properly be understood without taking into consideration the conditions of intermittent warfare throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; a war in which Robin Hood's skill with the bow was emulated so effectively by English yeomen.

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